

Correspondence of I and Thou

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The Forward, Nov. 20, 1992

The Correspondence of I and Thou by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue* edited by Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes Flohr, translated by Richard and Clara Winston and Harry Zohn. Schocken Books. 722 pp. \$45.00.

In 1951, when he was 73 years old, Martin Buber received a heartfelt letter from a Mr. Litvin, an American Jew from a Chasidic family that had emigrated to the United States at the turn of the century. Mr. Litvin writes to Buber that on his recent visit to "Eretz Israel" he fulfilled one of his dreams, that of seeing "his rabbi and teacher," by meeting with Buber for over two hours. But, Mr. Litvin continues with pained puzzlement, during the five months he spend traveling throughout Israel he did not hear a kind word spoken about Buber. Instead, wherever he went, his respectful references to Buber prompted nothing but complaints: that Buber had married a goy; that Buber lived among Arabs; that Buber belonged to an organization that dealt with Arab problems.

One could easily add to the list of complaints and seeming contradictions that Mr. Litvin recorded in his letter and begged Buber to clarify. The famous teacher of dialogue, Buber could be withdrawn and jealous of his privacy. A spiritual leader of Zionism in Germany during the first three tumultuous decades of the 20th century, Buber himself, despite repeated pleas from former students, friends and colleagues in Palestine to join them, remained in Germany until 1938, almost to the very last moment. Though a leading figure in promoting adult Jewish education and despite his voluminous writings on Chasidic legends and the Hebrew Bible, Buber achieved his most enthusiastic following among Protestant theologians. And wasn't Buber a mystic who presumptuously claimed to engage in dialogue with God? And didn't Buber espouse a romantic and utopian form of Zionism wholly out of touch with the harsh realities of economic and political life in Palestine?

These oft heard complaints and criticism, though not without some foundation in fact, are distortions and half-truths that have encouraged a faint and entirely unwarranted condescension toward a remarkable personality and thinker. The neglect of Buber as an intellect, educator, Zionist and Jew is shortsighted and unfortunate. *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue*, a hefty selection of letters written by and to Buber, edited by the late Nahum Glatzer, one of Buber's most distinguished students, and Glatzer's own former student Paul Mendes-Flohr, a Buber scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is sure to contribute to a better appreciation of Buber's extraordinary life and to renew interest in his seminal interpretation of Judaism.

Born in Vienna in 1871, residing in Berlin between 1906 and 1916 and then in Frankfurt for over 20 years until moving to Jerusalem in 1938, where he lived until his death in 1965, Buber was both fully at home in German culture and a loyal son of Judaism. Although he rose to prominence as a major spokesman for Zionism in his early twenties and remained a life-long champion of the cause, Buber devoted himself most fully to and reaped most bountifully from his labors as a student of Judaism and religion. The fruits of Buber's labors were prodigious and multi-faceted: his recovery and retelling of Chasidic legends; his grounding of Zionism in a Biblical humanism; his religious existentialism and philosophical anthropology; his translation of the Hebrew scriptures into German, begun in collaboration with Franz Rosenzweig in 1925 and completed in the 1960s; his ambitious reinterpretation of the Jewish Bible. What brings these many strands of Buber's life's work together is the powerful and in Buber's case fertile encounter between religious belief and modernity.

Martin Buber belonged to company of German intellectuals who, in the first third of the century, undertook in a variety of ways what has been aptly referred as the "movement of return." Growing dissatisfaction with the promise of liberal politics and the pretensions of Enlightenment belief prompted many German thinkers of stature to question whether modern philosophy had arrogantly and unwisely rejected classical Greek philosophy and biblical religion and to wonder whether it was possible to recover the ancient insights into the human condition that modern man, in his pride and narrow-mindedness, had tossed aside and forgotten.

The return Buber sought was a return to Judaism based upon a renewal of its core teachings. Buber recognized that traditional Judaism rests on the belief that Moses received the Torah from God at Mount Sinai and that the Law has been faithfully preserved and passed down from generation to generation. Buber was too deeply imbued with the skepticism toward authority and respect for human autonomy typical of modernity to believe that the Law, however lovingly interpreted, dutifully safeguarded, and carefully transmitted by rabbinic Judaism reflected the demands and commandments of God. At the same time, he saw with a clarity rarely equaled that the core of Judaism was and remained God's revelation to man in the form of a summons, demand or command.

Buber believed that Judaism could be returned to, or renewed because revelation was a present actuality. God's commanding voice, Buber taught, could be heard in the authentic encounters between two human beings. This hard thought, expounded by Buber in an obscure, abstract and often lyrical idiom, should be seen as a profound meditation on the Biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God: authentic encounter involves recognizing that the human being to whom you speak embodies the divine image and is holy because God is holy. On the other hand, by rescuing what he believed to be the core of Jewish religiosity-the idea that encounter with God essentially occurs in encounter with other human beings-from the outer shell of institutional or organized religion, Buber, in his renewal of Judaism, sought to effect a decisive break with traditional or rabbinic

Judaism. For the question arises whether the authentic encounters with other human beings that make God's presence visible lead back to Judaism or rather free one from dependence upon organized religion, Judaism included.

This is the fundamental problem that Franz Rosenzweig raised in his great 1923 essay, "The Builders," addressed to Buber and in part a response to Buber's masterwork "I and Thou." In an extraordinary exchange of letters, Buber confessed to Rosenzweig that he believed that revelation could never take the form of Law, for the formalities of law, the fixed routines and enduring institutions human beings produce in interpreting and implementing God's revelation, create barriers that come between man and "the unmediated word of God directed to a specific hour of life." Rosenzweig countered by insisting that devotion to the Law can and must be based on a theory of experience close to that of Buber's. The task faced by those who wish to renew Judaism, he argued, is to open themselves to the voice of the commanding God as it speaks through the Law so that the Law can once again become commandment. Crystallized in the correspondence between Buber and Rosenzweig are the fundamental and searing issues for the loyal Jew imbued with the spirit of modernity who seeks to cling to his or her Judaism. In the short exchange between the two friends these fundamental issues receive expression with a seldom rivaled honesty, simplicity and knowledge of what is at stake.

The Letters of Martin Buber contains many other treasures: young Paula Winkler Buber, intelligent, spirited and independent, writing an impassioned letter to her husband in 1899 challenging the narrow-minded cosmopolitanism that violates souls by imposing an oppressive and reductivist equality and wondering: "Why not bring the man in man, the woman in woman, to high perfection, to a wonderful flowering? So that they can stand as person to person?" Or Buber, still in his twenties, as the editor of the Zionist *Die Welt* making bold reply to Theodor Herzl's patronizing expectation that Buber would see the error of his ways on an editorial matter and repent: "Of all the feelings we may have repentance is the least likely, and we are prepared now and at any time to stand up for what we have said and done." Or Buber in 1939 respectfully but sternly admonishing Ghandi for advising the Jews of Germany to respond to Nazi persecution with satyagraha (passive non-violent resistance) based on a mistaken analogy to other forms of persecution: "Now, do you know or do you not know, Mahatma, what a concentration camp is like and what goes on there? Do you know the torments in the concentration camp, of its methods of slow and quick slaughter?...of what significance is it to point to a certain something in common when such differences are overlooked?" Or Buber, 86 years old, in the last year of his life, physically frail but morally and intellectually vital, writing to Israel's Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to firmly request just and equal treatment for the Arab citizens of Israel: "We (the executive committee of Ichud), together with the entire yishuv, welcome the plan for the development of the Galilee, but we emphasize the vital necessity to carry out this plan with the welfare of both Jews and Arabs in mind. This requires the presentation of a comprehensive plan that from the outset takes into consideration the needs of both groups of citizens."

Buber's correspondence reflects the everyday stuff of an extraordinary life: understandings and misunderstandings; tender notes to friends and family; anxiety over financial matters and worries about job security; professions of devotion from admirers and unsparing criticism from friends and colleagues. Do not, however, hope to pluck the heart out of the mystery of Martin Buber's soul by reading the many beautiful letters he wrote and received. It is not so much that Buber hides his heart, but that he is acutely aware of what cannot be said and must remain unspoken, even as he strains to respond to the unspoken needs, fears and hopes of those whom he addresses.

Our fast-paced, high-tech age has witnessed the sad decline of the fine art of letter writing at the same time that it has made an idol of a debased form of dialogue in which conversation is crudely subjected to rules and regulations determining legitimate and illegitimate utterances. For Buber, in contrast, the decisive virtue that makes dialogue possible is a listening openness; not the need to unburden oneself and have a say, but the willingness to hear what is said as well as what goes unsaid.

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